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ASSASSINS

They Silence History To Get a Share of It

By LARRY FINLEY
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THEY usually are little men, the political assassins. Obscure men of only minor consequence to the world who erase a bit of history with a bullet and force themselves into the void.

They are usually men of vast, unfulfilled dreams, who find a moment of fame in the dying light of a leader's life.

John Kennedy, the President; Robert Kennedy, the brother; Martin Luther King, the dreamer; Medgar Evers, the marcher; Malcolm X, the separatist.

All felled during a decade of death, when bullets vetoed ballots and the kill overruled the cause.

Their deaths, like the attempted assassination of George Wallace, serve to remind a nation that the same powerful personalities that can draw out deep love and devotion can also fan hatred of equal fervor.

The success of the charismatic public figure in Amercia has always been guarded by the knowledge that somewhere an unknown man with unknown reasons can end that career.

Four U. S. Presidents have been taken from office by the assassin — John Kennedy, William McKinley, James Garfield, Abraham Lincoln.

Since the turn of the century, murder attempts have been made on the lives of a total of 33 presidents, governors, congressmen and mayors.

But after the deaths of Sen. Kennedy and Dr. King in 1968, the nation's leaders and the public demanded a reason.

Northwestern University Prof. William J. Crotty searched for the answers as co-director of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.

"Our findings showed some pretty negative things," Crotty said. "The mood of the country has changed since President Kennedy's assassination.

"After his death, there was tremendous shock and a feeling that it wouldn't happen again. When it did happen again, polls showed that the attitude of the people had changed. They still regarded assassination as an abhorrent thing, but they accepted it as a political possibility."

Crotty said an intensive survey of assassinations and assassination attempts failed to turn up any "easy answers." But it did reveal some similarities in the major U. S. assassinations, which may or may not apply to the Wallace shooting.

An important similarity is that most assassins tended to identify strongly with a cause or movement, but were unable to successfully join in the movement.

The murder or attempted murder of any political figure as powerful as George Wallace is bound to have a deep effect on a sizable section of the population.

Of the political assassinations in the last 10 years, the death of President Kennedy had the greatest effect, not only because of his personal magnetism, but because he was the head of the country and the sympbolic political "father".

The 1968 Louis Harris poll on assassinations showed that 95 percent of the people felt great sorrow at his death. Many were afraid; even more were angry.

Even though a suspect has been arrested and charged with Wallace's shooting, a sizable portion of the population can be counted on to see the attempt as part of a greater conspiracy.

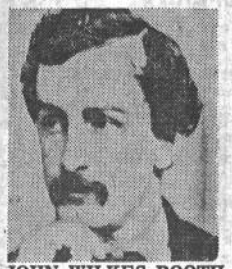
The many unanswered questions left surrounding the death of President Kennedy have added to the public's distrust of "official explanations." After President Kennedy's death, the Harris Poll showed that 62 percent of the population believed Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone.

1881: President Garfield Is Shot
The assassin, Charles Guiteau, thirsted for fame

The Assassin Style

—WITH THE EXCEPTION of the Puerto Rican nationalists who attempted to kill President Truman in 1950, none of the assassins or would-be assassins acted for purely political reasons.

—MOST OF THE ASSASSINS "experienced an absence or disruption of the normal family relationship between parent and child," such as the absence of a parent during youth or illegitimacy.



JOHN WILKES BOOTH

—ALMOST ALL ASSASSINS were loners who had difficulty making friends of either sex, especially in lasting relationships with women. John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, was the exception.

—MOST OF THE ASSASSINS showed some sort of mental instability which set them apart from what society would call "normal."

—IN THE YEAR PRIOR to each assassination attempt, the assassins were unable to hold down a regular job.